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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 003311

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [IS](#) [KPAL](#) [JO](#) [MEPP](#)

SUBJECT: JORDANIANS PROUD, SKEPTICAL OF AQABA SUMMIT

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm. Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

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Summary  
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1. (C) Initial reaction from a sample of Embassy contacts and the local press indicates that most Jordanians feel a combination of pride for Jordan's role as host of the Aqaba Summit (and King Abdullah's performance as Hussein-like peacemaker), but lingering skepticism that any real progress will result in the weeks ahead. Many welcomed the President's personal intervention but remain unconvinced that the U.S. can be an honest broker in the conflict. There is also deep cynicism about Sharon's intentions and Israel's true "desire for peace." End Summary.

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Nice to Be in the Spotlight  
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2. (C) Most contacts and local press, before launching into a more jaundiced appraisal of the outcome of the Aqaba Summit, assessed that the King played his host's role well and had done a good job showcasing Jordan to the outside world. In a June 5 editorial, the government-affiliated Jordan Times said the summit showed the Kingdom "can punch well above its weight," drew parallels to King Hussein's participation at the Wye Plantation talks, and said the King had provided a "gift of pragmatism, clarity, lucidity and balanced objectivity." The King drew similar praise from Woman's Rights activist Nadia Bushnaq (who commented that his speech "was the best of the bunch") and from a local business contact who told PolCouns that the picture of the four leaders assembled in front of Aqaba's mountains and sea was a terrific advertisement for the Kingdom.

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Good that the President Came,  
But Can U.S. Really Be an Honest Broker?  
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3. (C) That said, many were quick to caution that while the words spoken sounded nice, the true test would be what takes place on the ground. The Director of Crown Prince Hamzeh's office commented "I am personally encouraged, and I hope this isn't only a photo opportunity. We have to wait and see and to believe because the alternative is too dark." Regarding the President, he went on to say "simply put, we will not get anyone higher than Bush and we will not get any other Abu Mazen -- there is no alternative but to support this." Fardous Askar, a writer who is running for Parliament in the June 17 elections, told POLFSN that many he has spoken with "are encouraged because for the first time the U.S. was truthful about wanting to make a change." The English-language weekly "The Star" noted that "President Bush appeared serious . . . and after all is said and done, America's part in bringing the two sides together is invaluable -- without its patronage and commitment to a just and lasting settlement, Israel will simply not deliver on its promises."

4. (C) A local political analyst, however, had a more downbeat assessment of U.S. motives: "The whole thing was a production for Bush's campaign. I don't believe anything will change." He added that "It looked like the whole summit was about the Palestinians' need to stop terror and violence. I don't think anything was asked of Sharon."

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Deep Distrust of Sharon Unchanged  
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5. (C) One sentiment that was nearly universal among contacts was that Prime Minister Sharon did little to change Jordanians' deeply negative opinion of him. Human Rights activist Fawzi Samhoury judged Sharon's speech "a joke, because all settlements should be dismantled, and not just some outposts." A Jordanian diplomat echoed this feeling: "It was a bit disturbing that Sharon never made a comment about a free Palestinian state . . . (his) remarks about uprooting outposts are disappointing because all settlements are illegal and should be uprooted and not just outposts that Israel deems illegal." Oraib Rintawi, writing in the Arabic-language daily "Ad-Dustour," likened the current

effort to a "peace train" which the President forced Sharon to board. However, he cautioned, Sharon can still jump off this train later. Similarly, Jihad al-Momani in a column published in the government-affiliated Arabic Daily "Ar-Rai" evinced skepticism that the Aqaba Summit will be any different from previous efforts. Israel won't change, settlements will remain and Palestinians will continue to be pushed off their land, he wrote. Before long, Washington will again accuse the Palestinians of missing an opportunity for peace. Finally, another contact noted "Sharon's idea of negotiating in good faith is by invading Jenin yesterday, and shooting 11 Palestinians in Nablus."

Comment

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16. (C) After the violence of the past 32 months and a string of unsuccessful attempts to revive the MEPP, most Jordanians are, as one of our FSNs said, "afraid to be hopeful." Scenes of handshakes and smiles and well-crafted speeches, as important as they are, will not change this basic outlook by themselves. Only when Jordanians see on-the-ground improvements in the lives of Palestinians will they believe that a new chapter in the peace process really has begun.  
GNEHM